Social Change
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There is no simple answer to the question "where does social change come from?" and I would treat any explanation that purports to explain all social change with great scepticism. Any single theory can sound reasonable until another comes along attacking the problem from a different angle, an angle that can seem to yield equally valid results. Yes, the development of new technologies allows society to progress to new levels of production and organisation… but what's this? Of course! Social conflict is the real driver of change, the catalyst that causes a change in the structure of society.

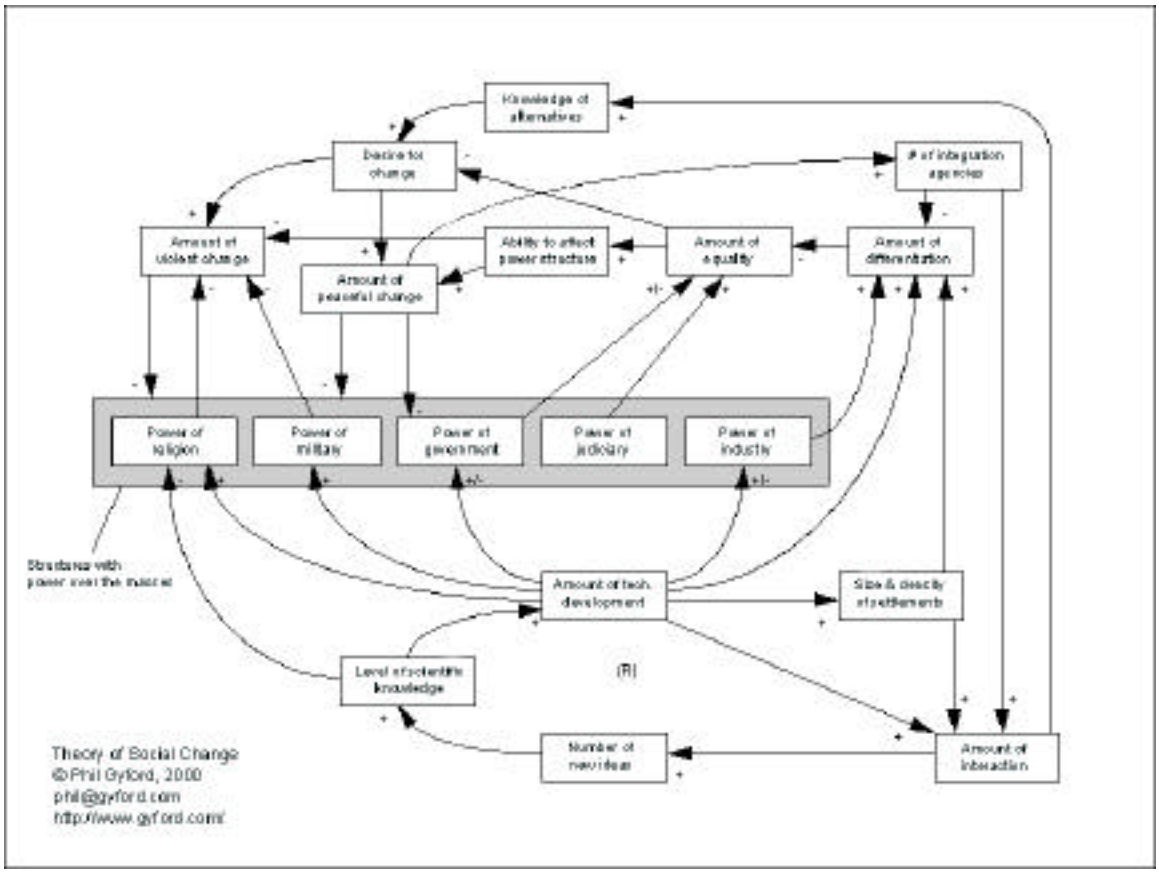
The problem isn't that any of these theories are completely wrong; it's more that they all have something worthwhile and valid to say. Believing you can explain societal change purely as a product of developments in technology is ludicrous. Certainly, there are many, many cases where new technologies have allowed seismic shifts in society. Can you imagine life without clocks? A world where news travels only at the speed of horses or sailing ships? But there are many other factors at play, too. If a powerful government doesn't want its population to use a new technology, it can, at the very least, hinder its take-up. A new method of ploughing fields, leading to greater productivity and a surplus of food, is a massive change; but if no one else but the inventor hears about it, if there is not enough communication among the farmers, what good will it do?

While such theories focus too narrowly on certain aspects of change, others can, in their attempt to describe the entire spectrum of societies and changes, end up with theories that are too vague to be useful. Looking at societal development as a series of repeating cycles can be convincing if supported by enough evidence. But the ideas will tend to fail by being either too specific to be useful as a more general description of social change, or else too general to be usefully applied to any particular society. Yes, societies have a tendency to rise and fall but there is no more evidence of an underlying cyclic pattern to life than the fact that conversations have a tendency to run out of steam after a while.

I must admit to a soft spot for evolutionary theories of social change, without going too far into imagining societies as living creatures. Just as Dawkins' mindlessly ruthless evolution makes sense to me in the world of genes, so it does in the world of social movements, where successful concepts will flourish and cause their societies to develop and mutate while unsuccessful societies will fade away (or go out with a bang). However, knowing this isn't necessarily any use to us – it's a distant, hands-off kind of view, the view of an observer, rather than someone getting down into the details of what makes a society tick. (Besides, if I simply agreed with this concept, this essay would end all too quickly.)

Having said that descriptions of social change are rarely useful or accurate, it is my task to construct one of my own. Given that there are many ideas with which I agree, but which seem only to describe a part of social change, it would seem to make sense to combine parts of these into one larger theory. All of these aspects (technology, politics, ideas, conflict, etc.) interact with each other, and separating one from another creates a manageable yet artificial description. Given there are so many interlinking factors at work, the simplest method of describing my amalgam of theories is with a causal loop diagram, describing how an increase in one factor has a positive or negative effect on

others.



Before describing the diagram I should first issue a number of caveats. I am attempting to produce a theory that is both detailed enough to be directly applicable to a particular society, and yet is flexible enough to be applicable to many different societies. This requires compromise and there will be areas in which some feel it fails miserably; maybe it's lacking detail here, or it's too specific there. This frankenstein construction of a theory won't look beautiful to everyone, but hopefully it is more or less the correct shape. Also, it is impossible to create such a comprehensive theory without it being shaped by the author's own preconceptions of how society works. For example, much of my system revolves around some level of conflict between rulers and the ruled. While this is in part a useful simplification for purposes of the model, one that is applicable in some way to most societies, some may see it as being too much of a bias towards a particular kind of society, too much structure built into what should be an objective model. But hey, it's my model; go and build your own. Lastly, this is a self-contained system, for simplicity's sake. While one society can greatly affect another in a myriad of ways (wars, aid, media, etc.), this is beyond the scope of the model. The only outside input is the knowledge this society has of alternatives, as a modifier of the peoples' desire for change.

We start at the bottom of the model, with the five elements in the lower section, which describe the technological and ideational behaviour of a simple society. We could begin describing this from any point as it is a reinforcing loop. The number of new ideas generated is dependent on the amount of interaction between members of the society; the more they communicate and exchange information, the more new concepts will be generated. This process increases the level of scientific knowledge, as new discoveries are made, leading to the level of technological development to increase. In the most basic

societies, this will enable, or even require, the inhabitants to increase the size of their settlements, as Gerhard Lenski suggests. New methods of agriculture could require co-operation and sharing of tools, something that is easier if everyone lives in the same settlement. As these towns and villages become larger and denser, the amount of interaction between people increases, in turn having a positive affect on the generation of more new ideas. Later, new technological developments could have a more direct positive affect on the level of interaction, with new methods of communication.

In the centre of the model is a grey box with five components representing the powers of religion, the military, government, judiciary and industry. It should not be assumed that all five of these will exist at any one time. Their power may wax and wane to the point where one or more become completely ineffectual. It can be taken as read that within this grey box, each element can affect the level of each of the others in both a positive and negative way. The military also represents police and other agencies that rely essentially on force (or the threat of it) to uphold their power, whether this is backed up by other elements such as government or religion or not. The government box does not necessarily mean an elected authority; it could equally well be a monarchy or dictatorship. It is the seat of the society's political power, in whatever form that may take, and may rely (or be controlled by) the military or religious authorities for example. The judiciary is essentially an arbiter of law independent of the government, and as such may have little power in many societies. It is hoped that it would have a balancing effect on the powers of the other elements. Industry represents the private companies that employs many of the society's inhabitants. It is a recent development in most real world societies, probably barely existing prior to the Industrial Revolution. As a whole these five elements represent the power of a few people over the masses, and the balance of power within the block can and will shift from one element to another. This is not to say these elements always hold great power. They may, for example, only gradually emerge in a simple society, one element at a time. At the other extreme would be a dictatorship or a fundamentalist religious state. It should certainly not be assumed that these five elements co-operate with each other or have one another's interests at heart because they are grouped in this manner; it is merely a device to simplify the model.

We can see that developments in our lower five components affect those in the grey box of power. Technology has a largely beneficial effect on these entities: it allows religion to spread its word further and the military can use more force, for example. Technology does not of course only benefit those in power – it can be, and often is, an enabling force for the people too. The level of scientific knowledge on the other hand will have a weakening effect on religion, as the populace may begin to question its beliefs and develop more rationalist thought.

We now move into the upper part of the model. In the top right we see "Amount of differentiation" and "# of integration agencies." These concepts are borrowed from Neil J. Smelser. Differentiation is caused by the increasing size of settlements, the rise of industry, and the level of technological development (again, from Lenski). The result is a move from traditional family-based work, often performed at home, to division of labour. with people travelling to another location to work for someone else. It is a move away from societies based solely on tradition, family and religion, towards a society in which individuals are more independent, with less ties to others. Integration agencies compensate for this, examples being unions, bars, clubs, churches, welfare.

The amount of differentiation has a detrimental effect on the level of equality in society. Government can change equality either way, depending on its actions, while an independent

judiciary will, in theory, work for equality, fighting for people regardless of their standing in society. The level of equality directly affects the ability of individuals to change the power structure (eg, the level of democracy) and also the desire for change – the more inequality, the greater the desire for change. This desire is also affected by the peoples' knowledge of alternatives; if they see something better than their situation, they will be more likely to want to change things. The knowledge of alternatives is affected by the amount of interaction within the society.

When the people want society to change, this can occur either peacefully or violently. If they have enough representation and influence on those with power, change is more likely to be peaceful, affecting both the structure of power in the grey block and the number of integration agencies. (It should be noted that this change can directly affect the government, or affect the whole power structure.) If there is little chance of effective peaceful change, then violence may occur, restricted by the power of the military and religion, with the aim of changing the power structure.

This is of course a greatly simplified model of society. One could logically draw connections between almost any one element and any other and justify it in some way. For example, a government could lower the peoples' knowledge of alternative societies by restricting communication with the outside world. Or a government could attempt to restrict development by creating a climate that doesn't reward development, slowing the number of new ideas. I have attempted to show what I feel are the most important connections and influences. Through these I hope it is possible to see how a society can change over time.